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AUTHOR Biser, Harry C.
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ABSTRACT

In discussing the current status and role of the admissions counselor, the author maintains that the admissions officer, if he is to function effectively as the college's educational emissary, must have a thorough understanding of the curriculum and must either serve on curriculum committees or have faculty status. He deplores the fact that this is not so in many institutions, and cites many examples of how an admissions officer is neglected in certain decisions concerning admitting students and how he is subjected to pressures by various groups. The admissions officer can contribute positively to the organization of college orientation programs, and he should have a say in college publications. He should also be given more authority and should participate in central administrative committees. Moreover, he can increase his influence in his college through active involvement in national and regional organizations. Finally, through the use of data gathered from test sheets, interviews and surveys, the admissions officer can provide valuable information on curriculum choices and academic planning. (Author/SE)

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"The Influence of the Admissions Officer in the Making of College Policy" (a presentation at the Twenty-ninth Annual Conference of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors in Chicago, Illinois, October 11, 1973 as part of Session #4, titled: AN EMERGING ROLE OF THE ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR), by Harry C. Biser, Associate Director of Admissions, Lake Erie College, Painesville, Ohio 44077.

Introduction

Much of what passes for new ideas in college admissions is really old information in new dress. The concern of this panel is not new. The search for a more sharply defined identity has been the admissions officer's quest for several decades. If he is to effect change or if he is to influence policy, he must continue to press for the recognition he feels he deserves. (Before proceeding I wish to state emphatically that the use of the pronoun "he" in this discussion applies equally to female admissions officers).

Perhaps we are speaking to the wrong audience here; many of you have sat through similar discussions in the past and went home intent upon bringing about changes. But you found that your superiors and colleagues at home were not impressed, so you stored your good intentions for possible use later. I have always thought that academic deans should attend admissions conventions and admissions officers should attend deans' conventions. And if you could bring in the presidents somehow we could resolve all of our colleges' problems!

The question: Should admissions officers contribute to the making of college policy?, is not really a debatable issue in my mind. To what degree and in what areas should he contribute is more to the point of our discussion, I feel. I intend to cite instances in which the admissions officer has had little or no influence on college policy making and try to suggest some of the reasons for this state of affairs. Implied throughout the discussion is my conviction that the admissions

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officer's contibution is desirable, even indispensable to the college's long range progress. And finally, I will suggest some ways in which the admissions officer might play a larger role in influencing college policies.

Past evidence and current situation

Only at the larger universities do we usually find admissions officers with doctorate degrees. This fact in itself should not disqualify them from serving on college curriculum committees but, apparently, it has had some effect. No more than half of all admissions officers have enjoyed faculty status at their respective institutions.[1] This situation has not improved in recent years if we are to believe Ed Sanders' article in a recent College Board Review.[2] In fact, Mr. Sanders believes that admissions officers have become even more removed from their colleges' academic operations than was true thirty or so years ago. He finds that top college administrators show their concern for recent enrollment trends by pouring more funds into their admissions operations and extending their recruiting territories. They have not enlarged the policy making roles of their admissions officers, a circumstance which the veteran Mr. Sanders finds hard to understand.

Serving on curriculum committees or having faculty status may not seem all that important to some of you. As part of a total involvement in the college's operation, I submit that these areas are most important. The admissions officer, if he is to function effectively as the college's chief educational emissary must have a thorough understanding of his major product, the curriculum. What's more, if he has done his homework carefully, he can contribute to the shaping of the curriculum (more about this later). As a member of the faculty, the admissions officer's views

will carry considerably more weight in general faculty meetings and in committee sessions.

Most colleges today combine or coordinate their admissions and financial aid programs. Such has not always been the case, however. Where such coordination is still lacking at a particular college, the admissions and financial aid officers of that institution are undoubtedly experiencing some difficulties. I served at one college where a faculty scholarship committee set policies and made individual scholarship awards but left the dispensing of governmental aid to the financial aid officer. He had the exciting challenge of trying to manipulate his work-study, loan, and EOG funds in such a way to meet the needs of the applying and returning students. That particular scholarship committee made awards to entering students on the basis of their SAT or ACT scores, largely ignoring their high school records. You can imagine the nature of the telephone calls the admissions office received from the parents of scholarship applicants and from secondary school counselors.

Few of you would argue against the vested interest of admissions officers in their colleges' financial aid policies. But do you feel the same way about their participation in campus orientation and counselling programs? Most of what we call student personnel services are designed to keep students satisfied and, hopefully, induce them to return in subsequent years. I am convinced that effective counselling, even if it is merely information-giving at times, can raise retention rates. Most admissions officers are held responsible for their institution's total enrollment; therefore, they should have a real stake in any policies affecting retention.

College orientation, as most of us think of it, is a week set aside at the beginning of the year. Usually admissions officers participate to some degree in the organizing of these programs. Provided that he knows his entering students, perhaps having interviewed many of them, the admissions officer can make a solid contribution in this area. If orientation includes a comprehensive freshman advising program, then his advice should be even more valuable to his institution (as we shall see later).

Most of you, I would wager, are either proud or critical of your college's publications. It would be difficult for an admissions officer to be neutral about what he considers to be one of the 'tools of his trade'. It is very important, I feel, that all catalogues, brochures, pamphlets, etc. sent out from a college convey a simple, but truthful, message of what the college believes in. In other words, it is an admissions officer's responsibility to see that his college's public relations officer is consistent in his various presentations. I have heard of institutions in which academic departments publish brochures, and mail them, without the consent or prior knowledge of the admissions office. This does not happen in colleges where responsible publications committees coordinate the printing and dissemination of materials.

In some institutions the admissions officer has little power because of his placement in the heirarchy. If his position is subsumed under the academic dean or dean of students, he is unlikely to have much influence upon major college decisions. Dick Perry's study,[3] referred to earlier, found that only a half of the admissions officers report directly to their presidents. Even though this study was conducted ten years ago, recent evidence would tend to support the same conclusion today. Thus we find, particularly in the small colleges, a situation in which continuous struggles ensue to resolve differing points of view. An

academic dean, either by nature or by training, believes that the admissions officer should be able to enroll brighter students and still fill all of the beds. The admissions officer knows, however, that "when the chips are down" his continued employment will depend more upon numbers than upon quality.

Just about every institution has a central administrative committee or executive cabinet, consisting usually of the key administrative officers. Whether or not the admissions officer is included in this group is a pretty good gauge of the esteem in which he is held at his institution. If he is omitted from this important committee, and this is the case in more colleges than not, he has little chance of exerting much influence upon the major decisions. His problems are compounded when he has neither direct access to the president nor serves on the administrative committee.

The admissions committee of a college is usually responsible for setting the entrance requirements and establishing admissions policies. And usually the admissions director is the chairman of this committee. It is difficult to envision an effective admissions program in which these elements are not present. When an admissions officer lacks substantial authority in the admission of students, he is at the mercy of the special interest groups on his campus. His control over the entire admissions program is thereby weakened considerably.

It is assumed that admissions officers, and other administrative officials for that matter, are always treated as professionals by their college superiors. Let me cite several examples to you of instances where such was not the case. One college president told me that he sent a letter to all members of his student body last year offering each of them a

tuition discount for each new student he could enroll. He, the president, informed his admissions director after the letter had been sent. The daughter of another college president, who incidentally had graduated from a different college from the one served by her father, was placed on the admissions payroll to handle special assignments. The admissions director learned of it only when he received his monthly budget printout. Another practice of a few presidents is the granting of admission to sons or daughters of trustee members, of personal friends, or of alumni without consulting the admissions officer in advance. I know, from one personal experience, that this can be very embarrassing. An acting president, for whom I served for a few months, promised admission to the daughter of a prominent alumna. Obviously she was not admissible by our usual criteria and I made my objections known. However, the upshot was that I finally worded the admission letter thusly: "Dr. _____, Acting President of _____ College, approves your admission to the entering class....". Another panicky president I knew decided to visit several high schools with one of his college's admissions counselors without bothering to inform his admissions director. And, in his zeal to improve upon the then current enrollment situation, he indulged in exaggerations and outright misrepresentations about his own institution!

Fortunately examples of this kind of administrative leadership are relatively rare. Most of you, I am sure, are accorded more respect than these presidents tended to show their subordinates. Yet there is the disturbing fact, as reported by the NACAC Committee on Budgetary and Management Practices of Admissions Officers, that chief admissions personnel make lower salaries on the average than do the full professors of their institutions. The professors are employed for nine months only,

whereas admissions officers work eleven or twelve months. Moreover, a large majority of the admissions officers are graduates of their employing institutions are are extremely dedicated individuals. The same cannot be said for the full professors.[4]

Up to this point I have attempted to specify those areas of decision making in a college in which the admissions officer should play a part. I have also mentioned certain kinds of obstacles which could inhibit his involvement in the process. Depending upon his particular qualifications the admissions officer may contribute in areas or on committees not mentioned here. The question arises: how can the admissions officer become more of an influence upon the making of college policies in the future if he has been given little opportunity to do so in the past? A second question might be: why should he want to play a major role in policy making if his admissions program has seemed to operate successfully until now ?

A third question could be: can we characterize an admissions program as successful merely on the basis of enrolling a sufficient number of students? I would think not. I would contend, rather, that the program must be a dynamic one; one which is integral to the educational objectives of the institution. It should be one which, to use an old cliché, makes the transition from school to college a little easier for the student. And it should be based upon the principle that the college deserves to survive for the next fifty years or so.

Some suggestions for improvement

Inherent in any suggestion for expanding the influence of admissions officers on their campuses is the presumption that they are experienced, well qualified individuals. We cannot expect the newcomer, for example, to sit on the major committees and advise on the important issues until he has served an adequate apprenticeship. By this I mean that he should

have performed all of the tasks normally associated with admissions counselling. It would be helpful, in my opinion, if he has also had college teaching experience and had served in several administrative capacities in his institution. He should be the type of person who can be understood by students, faculty, and other administrators without his associating himself completely with any one group. He should be a scholar in the sense that he keeps abreast of major developments in secondary and higher education. He should know just about everything concerning the admission and placement of students in college. He should be a blend of academician, counselor, and diplomat. (We could add to this list of desired characteristics, but this is probably a topic for another panel).

In a few institutions I know about, the admissions officers could improve upon the extent of their influence merely by being on the campus more often. When an admissions officer decides that he must follow a College Day circuit during the fall months he is forfeiting most of his opportunities to shape events at his institution during this period. In my opinion, the admissions officer can advance his stock by getting to know the people on his campus, and by people I mean students and faculty. One of the most rewarding periods I have spent in this capricious business was a term I served as chairman of the faculty club.

An admissions officer can aid his chances of influencing policies within his institution by actively participating in national and regional organizations. Preparing for panels like this one will keep him on his toes and the fact of his participation will spread the name of his institution a little more widely. In addition he has the opportunity to learn a lot more about developments in other college and in the schools. Upon his return to his campus he should submit a written report to all parties who might be interested.

You may have heard the statement: "he who has the numbers has the power". As far as I know this quote belongs to Bob Stoltz, the Southeastern Regional Director of the College Board. He is referring to the fact that an admissions officer can play a significant role in his institution if he uses the information he has available. For instance, let us suppose that he would like to see improvement in the quality of freshmen advising. If he knows the personalities and educational backgrounds of the freshmen faculty well enough, he can suggest that particular faculty advisers be assigned to particular entering students. Using SAT or ACT information, the high school transcripts, and interview reports (if available), he can construct distinguishing individual profiles on each entering student. He needs to go only a little further to justify the matching of students and faculty. If he has done his homework well, who can dispute the logic behind his recommendations?

Through the use of data gathered from the test sheets, from application blanks, and from interviews and surveys, the admissions officer can provide valuable information on curricular choices. His information might show, for example, that a declining percentage of students who have showed an interest in his college are selecting teaching as a possible vocation. This piece of data could serve as a signal to the academic dean that he consider a realignment of the educational faculty and, perhaps, reduce the number in a year or two. The admissions officer has a virtual storehouse of information at his command if he can set aside the time to compile it and write his reports. His influence in his college should improve immeasurably as he becomes more adept at interpreting data and predicting what different offices on the campus need.

Finally, the admissions officer can sometimes receive a larger role for himself just by asking for it. If, at the time he was employed, he convinced the president, or the search committee, or whoever was responsible, that he should be on certain committees and that he should have certain lattitude in the exercise of authority, he should probably ask for a two year or longer contract. He needs to appraise the situation and the personalities involved very carefully before he puts forth demands of this character.

Once an admissions officer has achieved the status and recognition he deserves in his institution he should work hard to maintain this position. He should always remember that his contribution is as valuable to the success of the enterprise as is anyone else's. And to do his job well he has to believe in the merits of his college's program. To believe in it over a period of time, he has to be a contributor of ideas to its development.

Footnotes

1. Perry, Richard R.; "The Admissions Officer", The University of Toledo, 1963-64, p. 33.

2. Sanders, J. Edward, "The New Admissions Scene"; The College Board Review, No. 87, Spring 1973, pp 4-6, 29-33.

3. Perry, Richard R.; Op. Cit., p. 54.

4. _____, "A Survey of Budgetary and Management Practices among Admissions Officers in American Colleges and Universities", The National ACAC Journal, Evanston, Illinois, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 4.